

The Task Ahead

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With the aid of Federal funds, the schools of America are now engaged in a concentrated attempt to improve the educational opportunities for disadvantaged children. The purpose of this intensified effort is to enable children who suffer from a variety of handicaps to acquire, through learning, the same educational objectives as other children so that all may participate constructively in our civil life, in our economic endeavors, in fulfilling and enjoying the responsibilities of family members, and in realizing as fully as possible their own individual potential. The aim is not to establish a substitute program for those heretofore thought to be incapable of learning but to provide means that will help the disadvantaged eventually to become full participants in our society.

This endeavor precludes the provision of busywork and play to occupy the time of children who will be given no effective opportunities to learn those things that are essential to intelligent citizenship, occupational competence, constructive parenthood, and breadth and depth of personal enjoyment. That learning which is important for more fortunate children is the aim for those who are disadvantaged. The path to reach this goal and the rate of progress may be different, but we shall not be satisfied until we have devised ways by which all children may become lifelong learners.

Educational disadvantages are of many sorts, and an individual child may suffer from one or more of them. Among the more common handicaps to learning are: limited early experience in learning in the home and neighborhood; no encouragement given to learning; lack of confidence in one's ability to learn; limitations in early language development; lack of attractive examples of learning in the home or neighborhood that would serve to stimulate learning; lack of supporting materials and facilities in the home, neighborhood or school, such as places for study, books, art objects, musical performances. Further common handicaps are imposed when values instilled in the home are in conflict with values assumed in the school,

when the content of school learning is perceived by the child as irrelevant to his life, interests, and needs, or when the child suffers from inadequate nutrition, ill health, or physical and mental disabilities. These educational disadvantages may result from various conditions such as poverty, a broken home, a low educational level in the home or neighborhood, or the fact that the English language is not used in the home. Or they may be caused by delinquency or neglect in the child's home or neighborhood, by family ill health, or by limited community services in the areas of education, health, recreation, and culture.

Because of the range of possible educational handicaps and the variety of contributing factors, disadvantaged children are to be found in all States and in most localities. The patterns of problems are different among different schools, but the tragic impact upon the child remains whenever he suffers serious educational limitations. The evidence obtained from current investigations indicates that for most disadvantaged children the gap between their educational attainments and those of average children continues to widen with each school year. Children from a city or rural slum are commonly a year behind their more fortunate age-mates when 4 years old; by age 12 they are commonly 3 years or more behind. We face difficult tasks in seeking to strengthen the educational environment from early childhood throughout the years of schooling.

Although the task of compensating for severe educational handicaps is hard and complex, almost all communities have some resources on which they can draw to attack this problem. We have some knowledge that has already been obtained from the experience of school people and from research studies. I am confident that additional helpful knowledge will be obtained from some of the programs recently instituted, and from the investigations undertaken by educational research and development centers and by regional laboratories. We now know that in early childhood,